

Corruption in sport – implications for sport managers

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Aim of paper

As part of a larger research project, the aim of this paper is to discuss the implications of corruption for sport managers, based on a definition of corruption in sport developed by the researchers.

Research questions

Academic and research partnerships between European and African universities have the potential to make profound contributions to knowledge creation, along with skills and capacity development. This is most apparent when diverse expertise can be focused on a meaningful applied research project that seeks to answer questions that are unanswered or where previous studies were arguably limited and the results questionable. In many parts of the world, including Africa, South America and Asia, heavy loads are regularly carried on the head by females, however what little research has been done on this phenomenon has used small subject numbers, and many of the results appear to be contradictory.

Literature review

Whannel (1992) suggests that “sport entertains, but can also frustrate, annoy and depress. But it is this very uncertainty that gives its unpredictable joys their characteristic intensity” (Mason, 1999: 405). It is this uncertainty and unpredictability that makes sport such an exciting opportunity for businesses around the world to take advantage of.

But what happens if this uncertainty and unpredictability has been taken away? Allegations of match fixing, illegal gambling, bribery and doping, in particular, plague the industry. It would appear that these allegations are not sport- or country-specific – it truly is a global problem.

Managers in the sport industry need to be aware of the different types of corruption that can impact upon results, both on and off the field. One of the major problems in enabling managers to do this is the lack of a definition of corruption in international sport. What actually constitutes corruption in sport? As is to be expected, researchers from different academic disciplines fail to agree on this. Sociologists Hughes & Coakley (1991) suggest that corrupt behaviour in sport occurs when athletes overconform to the sport ethic – by being a success on the track or field of play, the individual is seen as an ‘athlete’.

Sports economist, Wolfgang Maennig (2005), on the other hand, suggests that “corruption may take the form of behaviour by athletes who refrain from achieving the level of performance normally required in the sport in question to win the competition and instead intentionally permit others to win, or behaviour by sporting officials who consciously perform their allocated tasks in a manner at variance with the objectives and moral values of the relevant club, association, competitive sports in general and/or society at large”(189). Maennig (2005) fails to

recognise or acknowledge doping as a form of corruption in sport, arguing that corrupt activity is a failure to perform, as opposed to a super-performance that occurs when an athlete uses illegal substances in sport.

It is clear that these two ‘definitions’ of corruption are at odds – how can an athlete be doing everything to overconform to the sport ethic, to be seen as an athlete, and allow an opponent to win?

It is also apparent that there is a general lack of research into this area, particularly in the sport management field. Wilson et al. (2008) state that “an understanding of the dynamics of sport-sponsor relationships and the potential damage created by player transgressions is critical, particularly given the lack of existing relevant research” (105). The lack of an all-encompassing definition of corruption in sport is indicative of the problem facing managers at all levels of the industry, meaning there is no ‘standardisation’ in dealing with corruption – e.g. certain performance-enhancing drugs are banned in some sports and not in others; and bans given to athletes in some countries for doping offences are much more lenient than in others.

Research design

In order to develop a definition of corruption in sport, the authors are compiling a database of cases of corruption in international sport (currently containing in excess of 1,600 cases) in different sports and from across the sporting world. Based on this, a typology of this type of behaviour will emerge allowing a definition to be devised – one that can be used to define the entire phenomenon of corruption in sport. By doing this, the authors will be able to distinguish between the different types of corruption that may occur in sport, which sports are more commonly ‘associated’ with certain types of behaviour and what implications there might be for managers within these sports, including in such areas as sponsorship and endorsement revenue generation, athlete management, media ‘interest’ and relationship management.

Discussion of progress

Corruption in sport is not a new phenomenon. It is clear from the database that cheating, in whichever form, has been around as long as sport itself. Notable cases include members of the 1919 Chicago White Sox who took bribes to throw the World Series, Ben Johnson’s infamous failed drugs tests and the match fixing scandal that rocked Italian football a few years ago. Johnson’s manager was reportedly on the telephone organising endorsement deals for his client as he won the Olympic gold medal in a world record time – only to have it all taken away when he failed the drugs test.

References

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